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From Russia with Love

An ongoing collaboration between Illinois Wesleyan and Russian scholars inspires new research and surprising cultural insights.

**Story by SCOTT SHERIDAN,
Associate Professor of French and Italian**



Though tired after their long flight from Illinois, the visiting scholars were enlivened by a visit to St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square on their first night in Russia. (Photo by

Rebecca Gearhart)

This past fall, a group of Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members participated in roughly a weeklong visit to Russia, as part of an ongoing exchange that began in fall 2010, when the IWU campus hosted several colleagues from Russia for an international colloquium entitled “Childhood and Globalization.”

I was among the fortunate group who traveled abroad this year to be hosted by our colleagues at several prominent institutions in both Moscow and St. Petersburg, including the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, the European University in St. Petersburg and the St. Petersburg State University for Culture and Arts.

Financial support for this exchange, both this year and last, came from various sources, including Funk Foundation funds and Russian governmental educational grants.

In addition to Russian native Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies and director of the International Studies Program, and myself, our group of IWU faculty included colleagues from across campus: Irving Epstein, professor of educational studies and associate dean of the faculty; Rebecca Gearhart, associate professor of anthropology and chair of the Sociology and Anthropology Department; William Munro, political science professor and 2012 winner of the Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence; and April Schultz, chair and associate professor of history and director of the American Studies Program.

Two other colleagues at nearby institutions — Karen Coates, professor of English and children’s literature specialist from Illinois State University, and Deborah Stevenson, director of the Center for Children’s Books at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign — completed our group for the visit, around which the Russian universities in both Moscow and St. Petersburg organized a two-part academic conference entitled “Transforming Childhood” that included not only American participants, but scholars from across Russia.

Needless to say, during our travels to Russia we did make time for many fabulous sights, museums and cultural outings. For example, we toured inside the Kremlin walls, visited the vast Hermitage Museum art collections, peeked at the Soviet Cold War museum housed in a former communications bunker near the Taganskaya station of the Moscow Metro, and saw an amazing performance of *Swan Lake* at the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. However, highlights of our visit went far beyond the typical touristy itinerary, as it was, after all, an academic conference.

When thinking about how best to present and contextualize the nature of our experiences in Russia for this article, I came back quickly to the model of intellectual exchange and cooperation that inspired these exchanges in the first place. It was in the spirit of collaborative inquiry that I polled my colleagues both here and in Russia about the importance of our recent exchange, and this article reflects collectively our impressions of the value and lasting effects of these experiences on all of us.

Despite the fact that we are all educational professionals accustomed to interdisciplinary approaches at academic conferences, the ongoing dynamic of simultaneous translation during this conference — which required the use of professional translators and headsets — into both English and Russian necessitated that everyone accept a premise of mutual understanding from the outset; because language barriers existed, participants could not take the transparency of communication for granted.

Cultural and language differences required all of us to develop a different perspective as they forced us to listen even more carefully about both disciplinary and customary distinctions. As such distinctions can lead to unexpected insights, during the conference many of us came to consider Russian and American parallels on the role of childhood in representing and creating culture in general, and also the very specific social and historical contexts of those creations.

For example, we explored a public school based on a late-19th-century educational model that emphasizes technology, integration of differently-abled children into the curriculum, and Jewish culture and tradition, followed by a visit to a refugee and immigrant learning center. Both illuminated the important changes that have taken place in the former Soviet Union, as well as our common interests in cultural adaptation and immigration. This was a profoundly moving experience to see tangible efforts of another nation coping with the both the pain and possibilities of incorporating diversity.



In St. Petersburg, the group visited the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, built on the site where Alexander II was assassinated. (Photo by Rebecca Gearhart)



Marina Balina, left, and colleagues cross one of the many bridges connecting the islands of St. Petersburg. (Photo by Rebecca Gearhart)

As they should be, faculty members exemplify the model of the consummate “lifelong learner” — one who fully embraces and celebrates learning opportunities — and our experience in Russia was significant in that respect. The field of childhood studies is unique, in that all those who research it come at it with ostensibly the same general experience and meet with equal inherent authority. Although now adults, *we were all children once*. Because the nature of those experiences is quite different, however, the cross-cultural study of those experiences creates a space for perspective, comparison and critical self-reflection.

It is amply evident that our participation at the conferences this year and last have helped all of us to think differently about our research and pursue new directions for our scholarship, as we have come to freely exchange ideas and offer feedback to each other — both during the conference sessions, in post-panel discussions, and in less formal one-on-one conversations.

As childhood studies is a fairly new field in the United States, and an even newer one in Russia, the exchange of scholarly methodologies is vital for the development of the field. The sheer scale and diversity of Russia makes it different from the European countries whose scholarship we already know. Quite frankly, both the U.S. and Russia have enough material and scholars to keep an inward focus while ignoring the world past political borders, but that would be detrimental to scholarship and, simply, a sad loss.

The collective volume *Constructing Childhood: Literature, History, Anthropology* published this fall by Russian Humanities University in Moscow — which includes articles by American and Russian participants at the IWU-sponsored 2010 conference — is the best evidence of the fruitfulness of this exchange and the ongoing need for this kind of dialogue. These exchanges enrich us and inspire us all to be stronger scholars, as we become more dynamic in our approaches to the literature and culture of childhood studies. But more importantly, on some abstract level, they enable us to become more receptive human beings. As we better understand our history, folklore and literature that we create and share with our children, our work becomes more rewarding and makes better lives for students.

Aside from the actual conference experience, we all found fascinating the ways in which Russia as a nation is attempting to deal with both its tsarist and Soviet pasts. And we would all agree that our experience of these two world-class cities was made even more meaningful because we were guided by our friend and colleague, Marina Balina, who left the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and who is regarded as one of the leading specialists in Russian children's literature of the Soviet period. In fact, the visit to Russia made all of us realize that as much as we conceive of educational institutions as brick-and-mortar buildings and classrooms, it is truly the exchanges that take place on a daily basis — exchanges between colleagues as well as between faculty and students — that form the basis of our ongoing learning.

In the end, it is the collegial nature of these exchanges with our friends from Russia, from other institutions in Illinois, as well as right here on the IWU campus that forms a community. The IWU mission statement mentions *democratic citizenship* and *life in a global society*, and it is truly on an academic and professional level that we continue to experience the very spirit of those principles in our collaborations.

This leads me to conclude with my choice of title for this piece, *From Russia with Love*. When thinking about how to frame this account of the visit to Russia this fall, I couldn't help but make use of the famous James Bond film, as cliché and predictable as it may be. Despite the obvious irony of the title of the famous 1963 film, given the then-recent Cold War tensions in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, I offer the popular culture reference here as a testament to the possibilities of change.

At the time of the Bond film, nearly 50 years ago, such an exchange would have never been possible. 2011 marks the 20th anniversary of the fall and complete dissolution of the Soviet Union, and our visit to Russia celebrates the end of the long estrangement and tension between our two countries. As we forge new exchanges with our Russian colleagues, we must always remember the importance of perspective and opportunities of collaborative inquiry.

Scott Sheridan is co-chair of the Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures Department. An expert on 19th-century French studies, he has a Ph.D. in French literature from the University of Iowa.



Scott Sheridan was among the IWU scholars who presented research at Moscow's Russian State University for the Humanities. (Photo by Rebecca Gearhart)